

Executive Summary

The 2005–2006 evaluation found evidence of many new and continued successes in Montana Reading First. State, school, and district staff members worked hard to implement, deepen, or sustain Reading First practices in their schools. By the spring, about two-thirds of Montana Reading First students were at benchmark, as measured by the *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy* (DIBELS), representing statistically significant increases from the beginning of the year.

Spring 2006 marked the end of the three-year grant cycle for cohort 1. All 20 schools applied for, and received, a small amount of continuation funding for 2006–2007 with the agreement that most key components of the grant would be continued. At the same time, 13 cohort 2 schools ended their first year of Reading First, having made great strides in implementation. As discussed throughout this report, cohort 1 schools reached a deeper level of implementation and buy-in by the end of their grant cycle than cohort 2 reached in just one year. However, it cannot be assumed that cohort 2 schools will follow the same trajectory as their peers since the cohorts began the grant in different places and have different characteristics.

Grant implementation was not without challenges. All schools, especially those in cohort 2, have room to deepen implementation to further boost student achievement.

Professional Development and Technical Assistance

With 33 Reading First schools in 24 districts, the state Reading First staff was extremely busy providing professional development and technical assistance to schools and districts. The state-sponsored summer institutes, attended by all schools, received high marks for relevance and quality. Bimonthly meetings for coaches and principals were also very well received, providing useful information, resources, and adequate time to network with peers. Among cohort 2 coaches and principals, there was some call for more differentiation in future meetings.

In addition to the summer institute, teachers received professional development from external consultants and/or core program representatives who visited their schools; these opportunities were fairly well received. In most schools, the reading coach was responsible for the majority of professional development opportunities, providing one-on-one coaching and group training at grade-level meetings, study groups, or other forums. Coaches worked hard to establish trust in schools; these efforts paid off as the majority of teachers found coaches to be helpful, knowledgeable, and their allies.

While all teachers reported receiving some assistance from the coach during the year, there was variation in both the frequency and content of coaching. While there was evidence that coaches worked quite intensely with some teachers, other teachers received

no or very little one-on-one coaching. About one-fifth of surveyed teachers, for example, were observed by the coach quite infrequently (once or a few times a year). Data suggest that coaches sometimes avoided resistant teachers and/or worked with either new teachers or those struggling the most with program materials. Teachers who were “doing okay” were often left alone.

Reading study groups were also held in every school, often monthly or bimonthly. Perceptions of study groups, which were quite mixed last year, improved among cohort 1 participants, partially due to a well-received book selection this year. In cohort 2, however, many teachers remained unconvinced that study groups were worthwhile.

Another area that received mixed reviews was Knowledge Box, the digital learning software system that schools were required to purchase for the grant. While a few schools used the software frequently, most reported that they did not utilize the software to its full potential. Cohort 2 schools were plagued with technical setbacks, causing some schools to not be able to access the software until the end of the year.

Although much learning happened in 2005–2006, participants called for more and deepened training in many areas. Coaches and principals asked for more tools and training to work with resistant staff members; some coaches wanted more training in coaching methods and some principals wanted further training in instructional leadership, including providing feedback to teachers. Teacher needs and interests varied greatly, suggesting a continued need for differentiating training at the state and local levels.

Leadership

Montana Reading First districts vary in size from one school to over 20 schools. District coordinators, who had varying levels of involvement in grant activities, reported providing supports to schools such as grant management and analysis of student data. While most principals characterized their district as supportive of the grant, a small group of principals felt their district was overly involved or unsupportive.

Reading First principals are expected to be both a grant manager and an instructional leader. Data indicate that most principals spent a great deal of time on grant activities, including attending meetings, observing teachers, and analyzing data. As evidence of principals’ strong commitment to being in reading classrooms, the majority of teachers reported that their principal observed their reading block weekly. However, principals did not always provide feedback to teachers, and the frequency of their attendance at reading-related meetings declined from last year in cohort 1. Among cohort 2 principals, one-third felt the grant expectations for involvement in instructional matters was excessive.

Reading coaches continued to work long hours to fill a variety of roles and responsibilities. The evaluation found that their time, on average, was divided into four main areas: assessment-related tasks (26% of their week), coaching K–3 teachers (24%),

interventions (14%), and other tasks such as paperwork and attending professional development (36%). However, there was wide variation in the amount of time individual coaches spent on various tasks; some coaches spent little to no time providing one-on-one coaching, for example, while others dedicated over a third of their time to this activity. Almost all cohort 1 coaches felt their role was clearly defined; about two-thirds of their cohort 2 colleagues concurred.

All schools had Reading Leadership Teams which met monthly, most often to review data or share information about reading in their school. Grade-level meetings were also held in all schools; most teachers attended these meetings at least monthly and considered them a good use of their time. These meetings, and other forums, helped increase communication and collaboration in Reading First schools according to participants. Some schools, especially in cohort 1, said their communication was very thoughtful and meaningful; other schools were still growing in this area.

Similar to last year, data systems for the collection, analysis, and use of assessment data were firmly established in Reading First schools. Furthermore, teachers, coaches, and principals reported frequent and varied uses of data to make decisions. Most schools were confident that the DIBELS benchmark assessment was administered consistently in the fall, winter, and spring. Teachers' perceptions of the DIBELS, which improved over time among cohort 1 teachers, was less positive among cohort 2 teachers.

Instruction

The structures for reading instruction, which were well-established in cohort 1 schools last year, were established in cohort 2 schools this year. This included a 90-minute block of reading instruction for grades 1–3 in all but one school (at least 60 minutes in kindergarten), use of a core program, and interventions for struggling readers. New to both cohorts this year was the addition of lesson maps and templates to guide the use of the core program.

Most teachers reported that they were satisfied with the core program and followed the lesson maps with fairly strict fidelity. In general, cohort 1 schools had a more flexible definition of fidelity while cohort 2 schools held to a tighter definition; they made fewer modifications, additions, or subtractions to their core program. Although most interviewed teachers found the expectations of using the core program reasonable, there were some concerns that the pacing was still inappropriate and that some students were left behind while the needs of the highest-level students were not being met.

To target instruction to students' levels, Montana Reading First schools grouped students either within and/or across classrooms, using assessment data to determine group configurations. While grouping helped in their efforts to differentiate instruction, a sizable proportion of teachers reported that their students needed more differentiation than they were able to provide during reading. Large group size and lack of

paraprofessionals were sometimes cited as roadblocks to targeting instruction effectively; fidelity requirements were also cited.

Many research-based instructional practices in the areas of comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency were common practice in Reading First schools, according to self-reports of teachers and observations by coaches. For example, teachers reported commonly activating background knowledge when introducing new vocabulary and providing multiple opportunities for students to practice (e.g., chorally, with partners, with an adult). Data suggest that other research-based strategies need further enforcement, particularly in cohort 2 schools. These include ending round-robin reading, ensuring students have adequate independent-level text, developing user-friendly definitions of words, and using both examples and non-examples.

The instruction observed by evaluators in randomly selected cohort 2 classrooms, were of varying quality. While some lessons were clear and engaging, others were not, or showed room for improvement. Similarly, evaluators sometimes observed teachers monitoring student understanding, modeling, and providing feedback, while other times these practices were weak or absent. These findings further support the need for individualized coaching and differentiated professional development for teachers.

Interventions

One-third of Montana Reading First students (33%) received at least 12 hours of interventions, while one-fourth (26%) received interventions of shorter duration. Although the majority of coaches, principals, and teachers believed that their schools were doing a good job providing appropriate interventions, a substantial proportion of schools were unable to serve all of the students who needed them (this was especially true in cohort 2). Schools cited time, scheduling, lack of trained staff, and lack of appropriate materials as the main challenges. Another issue that arose related to interventions was group size; while Montana Reading First recommends that groups be five students or fewer, half of schools said they had some groups that ranged from six to 18 students in size.

Student Assessment Results

In spring 2006, the following percentage of students at each grade level were at benchmark on the DIBELS:

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| Kindergarten | 70% |
| Grade 1 | 67% |
| Grade 2 | 60% |
| Grade 3 | 54% |

At the project level, these spring scores represent a statistically significant increase from fall 2005 to spring 2006 at every grade level. There were also statistically significant decreases in the percentage of students in intensive.

Cohort 1. There were gains in the percentage of students at benchmark from fall 2005 to spring 2006 in every grade in cohort 1. From spring 2005 to spring 2006, there were gains in the percentage of students at benchmark in kindergarten and grades one and two, but a decrease in grade three. None of these changes were statistically significant.

Initial longitudinal data for cohort 1 indicate that there have been successes with students who began Reading First in kindergarten, particularly in retaining students at benchmark. Another success has been Montana's substantial strides in moving strategic and intensive students to benchmark over time. Specifically, 67 percent of strategic kindergarteners and 48 percent of intensive kindergarteners moved to benchmark by the end of first grade.

Cohort 2. By the end of the first year of Reading First, almost two-thirds of cohort 2 students were at benchmark. The largest proportion of students at benchmark was in first grade (68%), followed by kindergarten (63%), second grade (61%), and third grade (54%). These represent substantial gains over the year, especially in kindergarten and first grade.

Variations in Student Achievement. Among Native American students—who comprise one-third of Montana Reading First students—growth from fall 2005 to spring 2006 exceeded their peers in three of four grades. Growth was particularly strong for first-grade Native American students in cohort 2. While this growth was impressive, it was not yet enough to make up the achievement gap; the percentage of Native American students at benchmark was lower than their white counterparts. However, there was a wide range in gap of students at benchmark, from from 26 percentage points (cohort 1 first grade) to just four percentage points (cohort 2 third grade).

The rate of growth for kindergarten students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRL) was similar to their non-eligible counterparts in both cohorts. This was also true for first grade in cohort 2. However, in other grades the rate of growth did not continue to keep pace with their peers and FRL students remained less likely to be at benchmark and more likely to be in the intensive grouping.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on report findings and detailed in the final chapter of the report.

Continue to provide high-quality professional development and technical assistance to schools.

Provide support and training to help coaches further differentiate their coaching and maximize their time spent with teachers.

Identify and, if possible, eliminate excess paperwork.

Continue to build the content of Knowledge Box; encourage and model its use.

Address real or perceived concerns about the “high-achieving” kids.

Share and use evaluation findings.

